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ABSTRACT

A study sponsored by the Bureau of Adult and Community Education, Florida Department of Education, was conducted by the Center for Needs Assessment and Planning at Florida State University to compare the success of General Educational Development (GED) and traditional high school graduates in Florida's work force. (GED graduates account for about one in four high school diploma-holders in Florida, compared to about 15 percent nationwide.) A survey form was sent to a representative sample of employers throughout Florida to elicit their perceptions about the performance of GED and traditional high school graduates in the work force. Personnel directors from 101 businesses and agencies in the state, representing a variety of business types and sizes, returned the surveys. The results of the study indicated that in the areas of performance, retention, and dismissal, a majority of employers surveyed believe that individuals with the GED diploma can function, and are subsequently treated, no differently than those persons having a traditional high school diploma as a terminal degree. The study also indicates that GED graduates are promoted at the same rate as regular graduates in less than half of the reporting businesses and suggests further research to determine the reasons for the discrepancy. (KC)

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RESEARCH BRIEF

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Comparing GED and Traditional High School Graduates in Florida's Workforce

Philip J. Grise James D. Klein

Introduction

The state of Florida has one of the largest General Educational Development (GED) programs in the nation, with approximately 35,000 individuals tested and 25,000 diplomas awarded annually at nearly one hundred test centers. While nearly 15 percent of the high school diplomas in the United States are based on GED tests (Cervero, 1983), the GED accounts for as many as one in four high school diplomas awarded in Florida (Ladner, 1986). Due to the substantial proportion of Florida GED holders, questions frequently arise concerning the real world successes of these individuals after they obtain the GED.

A majority of individuals who enroll in GED programs throughout the United States indicate that they are interested in obtaining an equivalency certificate for employment-related reasons (Glustrom, 1981). Several researchers have concluded that a GED is helpful in gaining employment for a large percentage of diploma holders, and that the GED can enhance a person's opportunities for salary increases and promotions (Ayers, 1980; Cervero, 1983; Moore, 1980, 1982; Reed, 1984; Valentine & Darkenwald, 1986).

Recent research has been conducted to determine the perceptions of employers toward individuals with a GED. Results from these studies indicate that a large number of employers accept a GED as equivalent to a traditional high school diploma when making decisions concerning hiring practices, salary levels, and job advancement (Carson, 1986; Grise & Klein, 1986; Malizio & Whitney, 1985). However, other studies have suggested that traditional high school graduates show a higher occupational growth potential and a higher rate of employment retention (non-quitting) than GED graduates (Fields, 1986; Ladner, 1986). GED diploma holders tend to be employed in precision craft and repair trade rather than in executive, management, and professional positions (Ladner, 1986).

A study sponsored by the Bureau of Adult and Community Education, Florida Department of Education, was conducted by the Center for Needs Assessment and Planning (CNAP) at The Florida State University to compare the success of GED and traditional high school graduates in Florida's workforce. This paper describes the results of that study.

Method

A representative sample of employers throughout Florida completed a survey designed to elicit their perceptions toward the performance of GED and traditional high school graduates in the workforce. CNAP worked with 19 Florida Chapters of the American Society of Personnel Administrators, and with the Florida Association of Personnel Managers, to get as many businesses, municipal governments, and service agencies as possible to complete the survey.

Results

Personnel directors from 101 businesses and agencies in Florida responded to the survey by completing a portion or all of the instrument and returning it for analysis. A variety of businesses throughout each region in the state participated in the study, with at least twenty-one different types of employment organizations responding. Table 1 shows a listing of the types of employers that returned the survey, along with the number of each type. Some agencies found it difficult to provide complete information; therefore, not all of the items were answered by every respondent.

The percentage of individuals in Florida's workforce represented by this sample who have a GED diploma as a terminal degree is rather small. Forty-one agencies indicate that 10% or less of their employees fall in this category (see Table 2). Note, however, that forty-two businesses were unable to provide information when asked, "What proportion of your labor force has the GED as a terminal degree?"

Forty-three of the businesses and agencies responding to the survey reported that more than half of their workforce has a traditional high school diploma as a terminal degree (see Table 3). About half of the businesses in the sample do not employ persons with postsecondary diplomas. Thirty-seven agencies were unable to provide information when asked, "What proportion of your labor force has the traditional high school diploma as a terminal degree?"

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Copies of the full report (released November 1986) are available from: Bureau of Adult and Community Education, Department of Education, Knott Building, Tallahassee, FL 32301.

TABLE 1

TYPES OF AGENCIES RESPONDING TO GED SURVEY BY NUMBER OF EACH TYPE

Type of agency	Number of agencies in each category
Architectural/Engineering	1
Banking/Financial	11
Chemical	3
Construction/Development	1
Government service	17
Entertainment/Tourist	3
Food manufacturing	3
Health/Human services	16
Heavy manufacturing	6
High-tech/Computer	9
Insurance	5
Light manufacturing	7
Missile testing	1
Non-Profit service	6
Printing	1
Publishing	2
Real estate	1
Restaurant/Food service	5
Retail/Wholesale/Trade	8
Transportation (Private)	1

Note. Figures will not add up to the number of surveys received (N = 101) as some organizations are multipurpose.

TABLE 2

PROPORTION OF LABOR FORCE HAVING THE GED AS A TERMINAL DEGREE

Proportion of labor force with GED Diploma	Number of agencies indicating proportion
0%	5
1% or less	7
2–4%	10
5%	8
6–9%	3
10%	8
15%	5
20%	8
25%	2
30%	2
50%	1

TABLE 3

PROPORTION OF LABOR FORCE HAVING A TRADITIONAL HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA AS A TERMINAL DEGREE

Proportion of labor force with high school diploma	Number of agencies indicating proportion
1–5%	3
10–19%	4
20–29%	3
30–39%	4
40–49%	5
50–59%	6
60–69%	11
70–79%	9
80–89%	9
90–99%	8
100%	2

In addition to determining the proportion of GED and traditional high school graduates in Florida's workforce, the study was designed to probe employer perceptions concerning the performance of GED and traditional high school graduates in the marketplace. Employers were asked to compare the performance, retention, dismissal, and promotion of GED and traditional high school graduates.

. . . a majority of those surveyed believe that GED graduates perform as well as or better than regular graduates.

The survey asked respondents to compare the performance ratings of GED graduates with those given to traditional high school graduates, and to indicate how well the GED graduates perform. Results show that a majority of those surveyed believe that GED graduates perform as well as or better than regular graduates. Fifty-seven employers (56%) indicated that GED graduates perform the same as traditional graduates, twelve (12%) said that GED graduates do not perform as well as regular graduates, and four employers (4%) indicated that GED graduates perform better than traditional high school graduates.

. . . 51% said that the employment retention of individuals with a GED as a terminal degree was the same as those having a regular high school diploma . . .

The employment retention (non-quitting status) of GED and traditional high school graduates was also compared. Fifty-two respondents (51%) said that the employment retention of individuals with a GED as a terminal degree was the same as those having a regular high school diploma as a terminal degree. Fourteen employers (14%) indicated that the employment retention of GED graduates was not as good as the traditional graduate, while four respondents (4%) said that the retention of GED graduates was better than that of regular graduates.

The rate of dismissal (firings) of GED graduates was compared to that of regular graduates. The majority of employers (56%) indicated that rate of dismissal for GED graduates is the same as the dismissal rate for traditional graduates. Two respondents (2%) indicated that employees with the GED are dismissed less frequently, and eight (8%) said that individuals with the GED as a terminal degree are dismissed more often than those with a regular high school diploma.

In addition, the survey compared the frequency of promotion for GED and traditional graduates. Two employers (2%) indicated that GED graduates were promoted more frequently than traditional high school graduates, twenty-six (26%) responded that GED graduates were promoted less frequently than those with a traditional diploma, and forty-two employers (42%) indicated that GED and traditional high school graduates were promoted at the same rate.

In answering whether GED graduates are considered equal to regular high school graduates when hiring decisions are formulated, ninety employers (89%) indicated yes, while only six (6%) said no. One brazen respondent wrote, "I do not hire them!" across the survey. Ninety-one respondents (90%) answered that GED graduates receive the same pay as regular high school graduates, while one (1%) said that they do not. When asked if GED graduates initially enter the agency's labor force at the same level as traditional high school graduates, eighty-seven (86%) said yes, three (3%) said no, and one respondent (1%) wrote, "sometimes."

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that in the areas of performance, retention, and dismissal, a majority of employers surveyed in Florida believe that individuals with the GED diploma function, and are subsequently treated, no differently than those persons having a traditional high school diploma as a terminal degree. These results tend to contradict research done by the U.S. military which concludes that individuals with a traditional diploma have a higher rate of employment retention (non-quitting) than individuals without a traditional diploma (Fields, 1986).

The study also indicates that GED graduates are promoted at the same rate as regular graduates in less than half of the reporting agencies. It is recommended that promotion policies be researched further, including possible reasons why the freqency of promotions for GED graduates is lower than that of traditional graduates in approximately 25% of the organizations surveyed. Research should also be conducted to determine the participation of GED graduates in post-high school educational and vocational programs to determine if this participation influences promotion decisions.

In conclusion, it can be stated that a majority of employers surveyed in the state of Florida perceive that GED diploma holders possess the same abilities and perform the same as those individuals with a regular high school diploma.

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